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ABSTRACT

In this discussion of the relationship between ethnic majority teachers and minority group students the following issues are addressed: (1) teacher expectations; (2) modes of conversation; (3) styles of communication; (4) teacher calling-on-student behavior; and (5) eye contact. A recommendation is that action be taken on these issues and that they be incorporated into teacher education programs. A 22-item bibliography is included. (JD)

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The Growing Population of Ethnic Minorities in The Gymnasium: A case For New Self-Consciousness

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Introduction

More ethnic minorities are attending our public schools today, than ever in our history as a nation. By the year 2000, fifty percent of all urban school children will be from ethnic minority groups (Haberman, 1987). Public schools will be more culturally diverse and may be overwhelming for future teachers. Are physical education programs providing future teachers with the necessary skills to manage a culturally diverse teaching environment? Specifically, are teacher education programs providing future teachers with skills to support a positive climate in a culturally diverse learning environment? Are there requirements to ensure that future teachers develop familiarity with ethnic and minority studies, culture and history? To provide solutions, we need to respond to these questions. I have raised more issues instead in response to the questions without clear guidance. These issues include (i) teacher expectations, (ii) modes of conversation, (iii) styles of communication, (iv) teacher calling-on-student behavior, and (v) eye contact behavior. I assume that, these issues will engage teacher educators in conversations that will raise new consciousness about subtle events of educational significance in teacher preparation and teaching physical education.

Teacher expectations

What expectations should teachers posses about minority students? Is it a true assumption that minority students are generally less well prepared than majority students? What is the reality?

Research shows that teachers form expectations on basis of prior achievement, physical attractiveness, sex, language, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity (Good, 1981; Brophy and Good, 1984). Too often, low teacher expectations are a phenomenon identified with schools whose enrollments consist of a high proportion of minority students. Teachers sometimes assume that minority students will be grouped at the lower end of the ability continuum, and therefore lower expectations for them. These expectations become self-fulfilling so the students in turn do not perform up to capacity. A contributing factor to the low expectations some teachers posses for minority students may very well be a lack of experience with and knowledge of a student's social or ethnic group.

Modes of conversation

What comments are minority students likely to perceive as discomposure? How does a teacher obtain feedback regarding style of communication from students?

Majority teachers may comment or engage in behaviors that they do not perceive as an upset or disturbance, although they may be perceived as such by minority students. In many cases, minority students will not call the teacher's attention to this behavior or engage the teacher in a conversation to discuss their different perceptions. The student may then become silently angry or alienated, and the teacher may not understand why. Here is an

example. A seventh grade physical education teacher occassionally made attempts to show interest and concern for his student through personal conversations. The conversations involved family and personal issues and was appropriate from a majority behavior orientation. However, the student's interpretation was different and inconsistent with the "majority" acceptable ways of showing concern for a student. The minority student considered the teachers as an invasion privacy. Minorities feel discomposed when they are confronted with personal questions which they find upsetting to their self-possession.

Styles of communication

What are the characteritics of minority and majority talk? How does a teacher deal with silent students? Modes of behavior that minority and majority students consider appropriate for interactions differ in many respects. For exaample, the African-American mode may be high-keyed: animated, interpersonal, and confrontational. The white mode may be relatively low-keyed: dispassionate, impersonal, and non-challenging. The African-American mode is characterized by involvement: it is heated, loud, and generates affect. The white mode is cool, quite, and without affect (Kochman, 1981). African-Americans present their views as advocates for the idea. They take a position and show that they care about this position. This characteristic is typical of the oral culture within the African-American community. White views are presented as though the idea has objective life, existing independent of any person expressing them. This is the impersonal mode of expression used by whites.

Calling-on-student behavior

With what frequency does a teacher call on both minority and majority students? Does a teacher has to wait the same amount of time for minority and majority students? If a teacher has to interrupt students, does he/she interrupt in the same way for all students?

Research on student teacher interaction has shown that there are subtle differences in the way teachers interact with low achievers and high achievers. To the extent that minority students are simply stereotyped as low achievers, they may be treated differently from other students. For example, teachers may unwittingly communicate lower expectations to minority students by calling on them less frequently for demonstrations, by criticizing them more frequently, giving them less feedback, or giving general or noncontingent praise.

Eye contact behavior

Is maintaining eye contact a necessary condition for attending, showing interest or engagement? How should a teacher react to students who avoid eye contact?

Direct and sustained eye contact is valued in majority culture as indicating interest and engagement. Certain ethnic minority groups may possess different attitudes and cultural habits depending on whether they are first, second, or third generation in this country. In certain African-American families looking at an adult in the eye is a sign of disrespect (Byers and Byers, 1972). In Hispanic culture, sustained eye contact, especially between men and women of slight acquaitance, may be considered to have sexual overtones.

A final comment

Acting on these issues and incorporating them into a teacher education program is not easy. Teacher trainers will have to become more conscious of behaviors that have been misinterpreted, overlooked or taken for granted in the past. We have to cautiously examine the available research on teaching and the application of the results [i.e. the notable effective teaching strategies] with a culturally heterogeneous group of youngsters. Too often, research on teaching has been conducted in benevolent homogeneous majority classrooms. We therefore, have to be cautious, yet optimistic about the application of the results to the growing hetrogenity and culturally diverse groups in our schools. We now need to rejuvinate a new self-consciousness about teaching. Becoming more self-conscious about the changing environment will encourage curricular changes for better training and teaching in the gymnasium.

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